

# BOB

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Bob Hope reached his 100th birthday before the final curtain fell. Here we look back at the long life and successful career of the man dubbed a comic genius.

■ The old joke goes like this: "What's it like to be Bob Hope?" The punch line, as delivered with impeccable timing by comedian Bob Hope, goes: "I wouldn't have it any other way." When Bob reached his amazing century mark, turning 100 on May 29, 2003, he clearly wouldn't have had it any other way. Yet, only 60 days later, on July 28, 2003, Bob died quietly, his family, caregivers and a priest at his side.

At a press conference soon afterwards, his daughter Linda spoke lovingly of her father. "I can't tell you how beautiful and serene and peaceful it was," she said. "The fact that there was a little audience gathered around, even though it was family, I think warmed Dad's heart. He really left us with a smile on his face and no last words. He gave each of us a kiss and that was it."

A private, family-and-close-friends-only funeral was held early in the morning, three days after his death, at the St Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in North Hollywood, California, near the Universal Studios complex. The casket was draped with a United States flag and the chapel was filled with white flowers.

"My Dad's achievements filled seven

pages in the *Los Angeles Times*," his son Anthony told mourners. "And to everyone in this room, you've been his supporting cast." Afterwards, Los Angeles policemen escorted the funeral procession to the 206-year-old San Fernando Mission, where mourners gave Bob Hope his final standing ovation. His remains will be interred at the mausoleum there until they can be moved to a grotto that his family is building at the Mission. A larger invitation-only memorial service was scheduled for August 27, at the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, in North Hollywood.

"The nation lost a great citizen," US President George W. Bush said when he heard the sad news. "Bob Hope served our nation when he went to battlefields to entertain thousands of troops from different generations. We extend our prayers to his family. God bless his soul."

It's hard to believe that the indefatigable Bob – who lived for an audience – is gone. Several years ago, comedian Phyllis Diller asked him, "Who would want to be 100 years old?" Without a moment's hesitation, Bob replied, "Anyone who is 99."

Earlier in 2003, Bob had been honoured ►

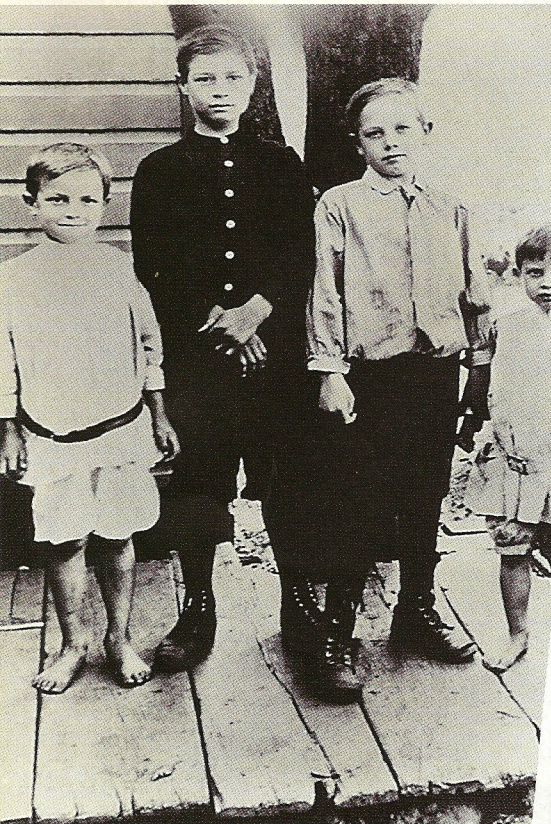
COURTESY OF EDDIE SANDERSON



The last of his kind: Bob Hope (right) with his perennial partner in comedy, Bing Crosby, and Joan Collins in the last of the Road movies, *Road to Hong Kong*, in 1962.

“Bob Hope was probably the most naturally gifted comedian of his time ... Shrinking violets belong in monasteries, not in dog-eat-dog show biz.”





From far left: Bob, five, (left) with brothers Fred, Jack and Sid, in 1908; the driven young vaudeville star Bob in the '20s; Bob surrounded by his leading ladies, including (from right) Lucille Ball, Joan Fontaine, Joan Collins and Dorothy Lamour in 1966.

with tributes from President Bush, his fourth star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame proclaiming him "Citizen of the Century", the re-release of 17 of his most popular films in a Bob Hope: the DVD Tribute Collection, a book called *Bob Hope: My Life in Jokes*, plus receptions, parties, TV specials and a travelling exhibit of his show-business memorabilia.

It certainly was a very special centenary tribute for the man cited by the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most honoured entertainer in the world.

His accomplishments, after more than 75 years in show business, are staggering: numberless hours on the vaudeville stage; countless appearances on his own weekly

Bob Hope's legacy of comedy is peerless. His talent is unmatched. He has been the acknowledged inspiration to generations of comedians, from Woody Allen and Dame Edna to Jerry Seinfeld. He gave years of pleasure and happiness to millions, including US soldiers hungry for a few moments' reminder of home.

Yet to stay on top, as he did for so long, hundreds of toes had to be stepped on – trampled, actually – along the way.

And the entertainer who was said to be

And Bob was never a shrinking violet. Far from being a devoted husband, he spent much of his life chasing women but, early in their marriage, his wife learned how to look the other way. His self-promotion was boundless, verging on the pathological.

"He's uncommonly common," Ward Grant, Bob Hope's publicist of 30 years, told me. "He's always related to the common man. He's never forgotten his roots." Even though he undoubtedly wished he could have, when he was much younger.

HIS BIRTH WAS certainly not as peaceful and loving as his death. He was born Leslie Townes Hope, in Eltham, England, on May 29, 1903. His English father, William Henry

**“He pursued her like mad; but Dolores thought he was a chorus boy. She finally caved in to her ardent suitor and the couple tied the knot in February 1934.”**

radio show and on television; more than 50 starring roles in movies; stand-up routines on stage and in nightclubs; and, most famously, that self-deprecating stream of humour as Bob risked his life over four decades to entertain US troops abroad.

His reputation has been one of sweet and kindly "GI Bob: America's Number One Soldier in Greasepaint", as well as a devoted husband to Dolores, his wife of 69 years, and loving father to his four children, Linda, Anthony, Nora and Kelly.

The truth, though, is more complicated.

worth \$612million was also notorious for his reluctance to part with a penny. He was loathed by fellow comedians for hogging the spotlight – as well as their material. And he was reputed to be a slave-driver to legions of poorly compensated joke writers, who toiled to create the material that made him the funniest man in the world.

"Bob Hope was probably the most naturally gifted comedian of his time," gossip columnist Walter Winchell said. "Shrinking violets belong in monasteries, not in dog-eat-dog show biz."

Hope, was a stonemason, and his Welsh mother, Avis Townes Hope, an aspiring concert singer who abandoned her dreams when she quickly began producing babies: Ivor, James Francis, Emily (who died as a toddler) Frederick Charles, William John "Jack", Leslie, Sidney and George.

The family was desperately poor and William was an alcoholic, prone to bouts of disappearing and outbursts of temper.

Avis put up with it. When, in 1907, her husband decided their prospects would be better in America, she packed up her brood





Left: Dolores and Bob Hope at their Toluca Lake, California, home in 1990. Above: Bob, then 98, with (from left) his son Kelly, daughter Nora, wife Dolores, son Anthony, daughter Linda and grandson Andrew at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, in May 2001.

and made the dreadful voyage in steerage, then travelled on to Cleveland, Ohio. "I left England at the age of four, when I found out I couldn't be king," Bob liked to joke. Yet his family's miserable situation was hardly the stuff of comedy.

To understand Bob's chronic need for constant adulation and applause, as well as his notorious miserliness, you need only look at his childhood. Unlike his brothers, who settled into normal jobs, Bob was driven. In fact, he was beyond driven. He was a scrappy kid, always getting into fights and mischief, and as he grew he became determined to do whatever it took to get away from his family's stifling poverty and become "somebody".

He wasn't particularly handsome – with a ski-jump nose shaped by a childhood fall from an apple tree. He wasn't particularly suave – although he could sing and dance with some grace.

Yet he did have a unique gift. He was funny. He had won a Charlie Chaplin imitation contest at the age of 10, because he could do pratfalls with aplomb, and tell jokes and saucy vignettes with uniquely spontaneous humour. And he knew it.

He earned pocket money selling papers and, while a constant entrant in amateur shows, dropped out of high school to work in such thankless jobs as delivery boy, soda jerk, shoe salesman and pool hustler, while taking dance lessons.

For a very short time, he even tried professional boxing under the name Packy

East, but realised that wasn't going to be his ticket to the top.

The vaudeville circuit – different acts from singers to dancers, comics, jugglers and strippers – gave performers a chance to tour America and hone their material and timing as they went through the grind of several shows each night.

Bob always joked about his early show biz days, just as he joked about everything else in his life. Vaudeville is now regarded, through a haze of memory, as a golden era in entertainment. In reality, though, most of the shows were exceptionally crude, the performers bores, the audiences full of drunks or randy couples eager for a "cuddle" in the dark, grubby theatres. Salaries were barely starvation wages, and the nightly accommodation in fleabag hotels better suited to mice than men.

Bob had no choice. He had no money, no other skills, only his determination – and the company of partners he enticed to join him. Naturally, Bob was always billed first. After all, he'd been the one to secure the bookings – so he deserved the lion's share of the fees, too. Bob and his ever-changing and long-suffering partners spent several years hoofing around the US Midwest.

In 1926, when he was 23, he finally got a break, after he was hired to appear in major New York theatres and chosen to appear with his partner George Byrne in the Broadway show *Sidewalks of New York*, which starred Ruby Keeler. The show was a hit, but Bob and George's segment was

soon cut because there were already enough dancers in the show.

Devastated, Bob and George retreated to venues in the Midwest, Bob plotting his Broadway return all the while. He was going back in style, as a solo act. He relished the adulation that came whenever he was given the opportunity to either work as a master of ceremonies, or do what amounted to stand-up comedy. After all, wasn't he the funniest man in the world? The world was yet to discover this, but he knew it. And once he was discovered – look out, world!

In 1932, Bob came back to Broadway in a show called *Ballyhoo*. A year later came the break he'd been longing for after more than 12 years of scraping by and gritting his teeth as others surged ahead. Cast as a wiseacre in the 1933 Broadway musical *Roberta*, he got rave reviews. At last, aged an ancient (for show biz) 30, Bob was going to make it. Even better, his skirt chasing was incredibly successful. (Rumours flew for years that it may also have given him a sexually transmitted disease that rendered him infertile.)

Finally, he fell madly in love. One of his co-stars took him to see a sultry young singer named Dolores Reade appearing at the Vogue Club, and Bob was hooked.

"He pursued her like mad, but Dolores thought he was a chorus boy," Ward Grant says with a chuckle. She finally caved in to her ardent suitor, however, and the couple tied the knot in February 1934.

Bob continued working on Broadway, ►





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in 1936, appearing with Fanny Funny Girl Brice in *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Red, Hot and Blue* with legends Jimmy Durante and Ethel Merman. More importantly, he was also establishing himself in radio, as essential a stop on the road to stardom in the '30s and '40s as television is now. He'd already broadcast on radio while promoting his Broadway shows and he proved a natural.

In 1937, he signed a 26-week contract for the *Woodbury Soap Show*, broadcast from NBC in New York. A year later, he finally had his own show, sponsored by Pepsodent toothpaste. His voice, routines and ever impeccable timing became as familiar to Americans as the voice of their president.

Hollywood scouts saw this popularity as something to bank on, and Bob moved to Los Angeles to appear in his first major feature, *The Big Broadcast of 1938*, while doing his radio show via transcontinental hook-up. In it, he sang what was to be his trademark song, *Thanks for the Memory*.

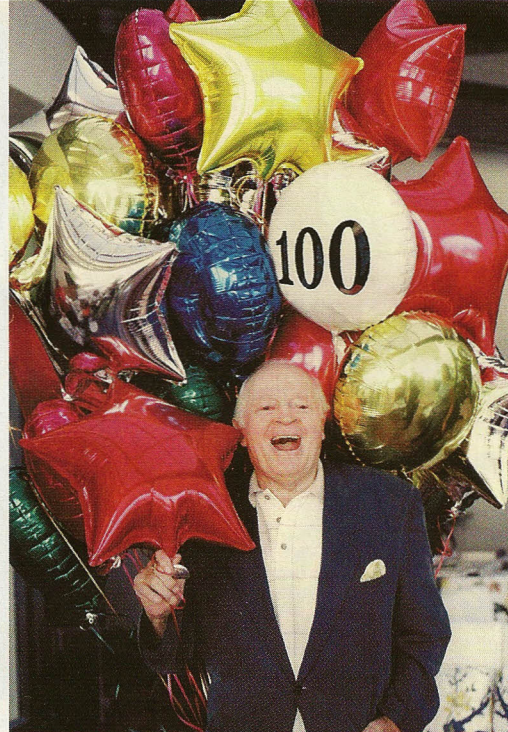
After another hit in *The Cat and the Canary* in 1939, Bob struck gold when he was partnered with crooner Bing Crosby and the voluptuous Dorothy Lamour in *The Road to Singapore*, in 1940. It was the first of what became the seven very popular *Road* movies, all of which had Bob playing the fall guy, with a ready quip and an even readier leer. Yet he appeared so sexually harmless and managed to portray his second-banana status with such natural ease (far harder than it seemed) that he struck a chord with both men and women. Bob had found his niche.

Fans and the media loved the Crosby/ Hope duo and the two played up their "friendly enemies" on-screen personas in their many personal appearances. Behind the scenes, though, the two were bitter rivals, both too selfish and ambitious to let their guards down. Bob made fun of Bing's ears and the hairpieces he used to cover up his bald spot, calling him Skinhead. Bing made fun of Bob's nose and love handles, calling him Mattress Hip.

More worrying to Bob was Bing's status as a matinee idol. Bob never loved sharing the spotlight, so having to work so closely with another star - especially playing the buffoon-like character who never got the girl - irked his ego, yet he tolerated Bing because their movies were successful and made money.

Bing was no slouch when it came to fighting for the best shots. While shooting *The Road to Singapore*, co-star Charles Coburn nearly left the set in a fit of pique after enduring their hissy fits. "They're rampant egomaniacs!" Charles shouted.

Dorothy Lamour was caught in the middle of this mutual spite fest. When shooting *The Road to Bali* (1952), which sported cameos by young, up-and-coming



**Bob on his 95th birthday in May 1998 at his Palm Springs, California, home. As a joke, his family included the "100" balloon.**

comics Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Bing and Bob kept blowing their lines.

"Better warm up Martin and Lewis," Dorothy teased. "They're not only funnier, but younger." Everyone laughed - except Bob and Bing.

"You better be careful how you talk to us," Bob told her later, his voice cold. "You can always be replaced by an actress."

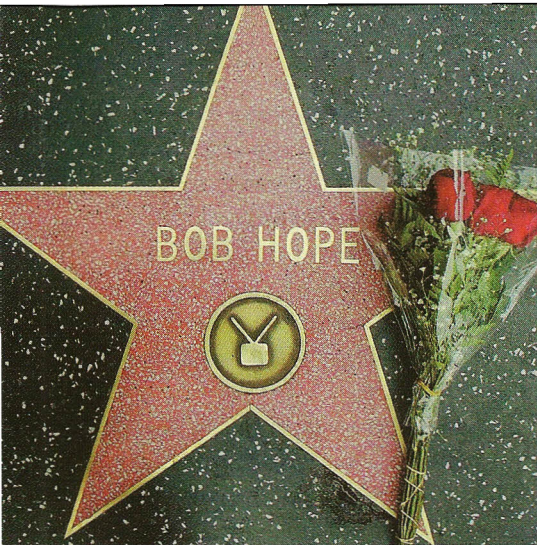
He wasn't kidding. Later in life, he and Bing would play golf and guest-star on programs together, but Bing never went overseas with Bob. At a tribute to Bob held at the fabled Friar's Club in 1989, Bing was also a no-show. When asked why, his reply was a succinct, "I wasn't hungry".

However, more important events were to reshape Bob's career: World War II would change his life forever. In May 1941, Bob and a group of entertainers went to March Field, in California, to do a radio show for airmen stationed there. Soon, Bob was taking his radio show to training camps and air bases all around America and, once these troops were sent abroad, Bob followed them to Europe and the South Pacific.

Detractors claimed that Bob's wartime travels were selfish at heart. After all, this kind of work would make the king of self-promotion incredibly beloved - and ensure that millions of new fans would remain loyal to him once they got home.

Yet it seems too cynical to believe that Bob's wartime entertainment was solely designed to benefit Bob. He was on the road non-stop, all over the world. The trips were incredibly dangerous and stressful. He spent endless hours in field hospitals - always entering with the ridiculous quip, "At ▶





In 1948, the war over, Bob began what became a Christmas custom when he went with Dolores to Germany to entertain the troops involved in the Berlin airlift. Every Christmas thereafter, Bob did a show at a military base or hospital. He touched the lives of soldiers in a marvellous way, yet his own family suffered from his absences.

Dolores had never become pregnant and Bob finally agreed to adopt. He told the press in 1939, "A house isn't a house without a child in it, and since we've been married for five years we think we'd be very selfish going along this way without giving some orphan a chance to have things we would

his favourite hobby, golf. Dolores raised the kids and was renowned for her kindness and devotion, as well as her style.

The Hope homes in Toluca Lake, a Los Angeles suburb, and Palm Springs, were cosy and delightful. Penny-pinching Bob never wanted to pay Beverly Hills prices, although he could afford them – he was filthy rich, due to savvy investments in real estate, securities, oil and broadcasting. "He's always been wise in money matters. He was so poor, he watches things," Ward Grant says, with vast understatement.

Yet he always supported charities, with most donations made anonymously.

**“I was offering time and laughs – the men and women fighting the war were offering their lives. They taught me what sacrifice was all about.”**

ease, men, don't get up" to immobilised soldiers, which naturally made them laugh, giving cheer to thousands of men lying in pain. He would be devastated after these visits, yet he kept his cheery face on to hide his sorrow and went on to the next gig. "I realised that any contribution I was making was minimal," he said. "I was offering time and laughs – the men and women fighting the war were offering their lives. They taught me what sacrifice was all about."

have liked when we were young." Bob wasn't overjoyed, even though having the children she so wanted would keep Dolores busy and complaining less about his busy schedule and penchant for other women.

Bob and Dolores' four children were adopted between 1939 and 1946. Yet Bob became as infrequent a visitor to his own home as his own father had been. And, when he was home, he was more often than not away from family obligations pursuing

"What's never seen is his generosity behind the scenes," Ward adds. "We don't talk about those things to the media. Bob never wanted to." He was, however, more than happy to talk about his hosting of the Bob Hope Chrysler Classic, a professional-amateur charity golf tournament, held annually in Palm Springs, California. After 44 years, the Classic has raised more than \$53million for the Eisenhower Medical Center and 70 other charities.

AAP





"If you watch a game, it's fun. If you play at it, it's recreation. If you work at it, it's golf," Bob quipped.

As radio gave way to TV, Bob's energy never flagged. He appeared on specials and often hosted the Academy Awards, being given five honorary Oscars over the years. He entertained troops in Korea during that war and appeared in some of his favourite films: *Son of Paleface* (1952), *The Seven Little Foys* (1955) and *Beau James* (1957).

Yet, as the sexual revolution dawned in the 1960s and social upheaval transformed America, Bob's style of humour seemed more than vaguely anachronistic.

In a telling incident, one of his TV specials was a flop with critics. Bob was so enraged that he had his publicists quote a rave review from the "*Chicago News*", then contact a well-known Los Angeles critic with that favourable review in hand and demanding a retraction of the unfavourable one he had written. The savvy LA critic knew there was no such paper as the *Chicago News*. The plan backfired.

Bob relied on teams of gag-writers to supply new material, and he was one of the first comedians to admit to needing them (which was commendable, although he never discussed the pittances he paid them).

"He never wanted to do the same thing, so he needed writers," Ward explains. "After

all, a bad joke will always be a bad joke—but he could always get his writers to make a good joke greater. He had an eye for talent, so the best writers in the world came to him. At the end of the day, though, he was the one who controlled the output. He controlled everything."

These jokes were categorised by subject matter and filed in cabinets in a fire- and theft-proof vault in an office next to Bob's Toluca Lake home. Whenever he needed a joke, he knew where to find one.

Even smarter was Bob's trademark use of not only topical but personalised gags. When he entertained soldiers, he knew the names of their commanding officers; when wartime locations were dreadful, he'd research the particulars of what made them so rotten. It was a brilliant way of staying relevant. "He tailored his humour to mirror the headlines of history," Ward explains. "His style of humour didn't change, only the content."

The style that had served him well for 40 years, though, often fell flat as he got older. Stereotypical jokes about "girls" and "dames" were not appreciated by women's libbers. Quips about America were met with fury by those protesting the Vietnam War. When Bob went to see the troops in Vietnam, he made the soldiers laugh, but he indelibly alienated younger generations.

That made no difference, however, to the millions who already loved Bob Hope. "Seeing him make personal appearances, with the admiration and adoration he got from coast to coast, was astonishing," Ward says. "His secret for not being mobbed by fans was, 'Don't stop'. Except he would always stop for babies and men in uniform. He was amazingly energetic. I never met a more positive man in my life."

By the time *The Secret Life of Bob Hope*, an unflattering biography by Arthur Marx, son of Groucho, was published in 1993, Bob was no longer requesting concocted reviews. "'Just ignore it,' Bob told me, shrugging," says Ward. "'Don't worry'."

In 1998, Queen Elizabeth awarded him a knighthood (a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire). "My relatives always greet me at the airport with a big banner," Bob joked of England. "It says, 'Yankee Go Home'."

In his final years, Bob Hope was unable to make the public appearances he craved; he became frail, deaf and nearly blind. Still, he survived a century of tumult.

And now that his long career has come to a close, Bob Hope is not remembered for his sexual shenanigans, miserliness or scene stealing. He is hailed for something more important: laughter and happiness. **W**

—KAREN MOLINE



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